

Who's that girl? The case of Ovid's Corinna

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And there are many who ask who my Corinna is ...
(Ovid, *Art of Love* 3.538)

Corinna is the romantic and erotic focus of Ovid's *amor* and of his *Amores* – but who is she? Ovid sometimes hints that the woman he calls 'Corinna' is a married woman of some rank and status, but also suggests that she could be a courtesan or a *meretrix*, even alluding to her as a 'whore'. She is beautiful but vain, clever but calculating, jealous but unfaithful, passionate but cruel. In fact, she looks like a perfect carbon copy of the stereotypical elegiac girlfriend, like Propertius' Cynthia or Tibullus' Delia.

How do you solve a problem like Corinna?

In *Amores* 3.12, Ovid complains that his poems in praise of Corinna's beauty and charms have made other men want her too and that now he feels like her 'pimp'. He reminds us that poets make things up: a gentle reminder to his readers that Corinna's beauty and charms may not really be as he has described them in his love poetry – but a hint too that Corinna herself may have been 'made up', manufactured by Ovid's imagination and pen. What's more, Ovid is clearly mocking the gullibility of some of his readers when he tells us that (*Amores* 2.17.28–30):

*There are many women who would like to make a
name through me.
I know one girl who spreads it around that she is
Corinna.
What wouldn't she give to make it so?*

His teasing here is full of sexual innuendo. When he tells us about the girl who 'spreads it around that she is Corinna' and that she would give him anything – including herself – to make it so, he is suggesting that 'Corinna' might be *any* girl with whom he chooses to have sex. In fact – with a motif that resonates throughout the *Amores* – he claims here that there are 'many' women who would like to be his girlfriend, to play Corinna's part and take her name.

Yet, in the same poem, Ovid seems to pledge his fidelity to Corinna as 'the only one' for him (2.17.33f.):

*I will sing of none but you in my little books;
You alone will be the inspiration to my genius.*

Here, Ovid appears to be making the point that, of all the women he might choose to call 'Corinna' and to make his *amor*, he has singled out this *one* woman. But in the broader context of the *Amores*, Ovid's promise that Corinna is the only *one* for him can be read as a lightly veiled threat. If 'Corinna' does not mend her ways and treat her lover with more tenderness and respect, if she does not try to love him as (he says) he loves her, then there are plenty of other women out there to whom he can say in her place: 'you are the only one for me', or its Latin equivalent, *tu mihi sola places*.

Again, as if to illustrate that Corinna is only one of many girls to whom Ovid might choose to say *tu mihi sola places* – 'you are the *one* for me' – Ovid gives us a comprehensive list of all the different types of women who turn him on, claiming that

(2.4.9f.):

*There's no particular kind of beauty that inspires my
loves (amores).
And there are a hundred reasons why I'm always in
love.*

He goes on to tell us that he loves modest girls who look shy, virgins who look like a challenge *and* sexy flirts who look like they will be easy to get into bed. He loves educated women and simple girls; women who praise his poetry and women who criticize it; he loves women who sing, who play the lyre, and women who dance; he loves tall women, short women, well-dressed and scruffy women; he loves blondes and he loves black girls; he loves dark hair and fair hair, young girls and older women. Ovid was the original 'man who loved women'. He claims explicitly that his *amores* (both his poetry and his passions) are inspired by all these different types of women, and that – in a corruption of the elegiac lover's declaration *tu mihi sola places* – each one of these women 'pleases' him, and each one is '*the one*' for him. So how and where does Corinna fit in to this list?

A girlie girl

Significantly, the key to understanding Corinna's place in Ovid's *Amores* may lie in her name. Corinna shares the Greek styling of her name with the other mistresses of Roman love poetry, yet one key characteristic of this fake name distinguishes her from those other elegiac women – and, at the same time, identifies her as an 'everywoman'. While the names of Lycoris, Delia, and Cynthia (respectively loved by Ovid's poetic predecessors Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius) each allude to cult names associated with Apollo, god of poetry, Corinna draws her pseudonym from a 'real' woman – the Greek love poet Korinna. And, in an ingenious bilingual wordplay depending upon his original Roman audience's knowledge of Greek, Ovid's use of the name 'Corinna' as the pseudonym for his girlfriend plays on the Greek word for 'girl' – *kore*: a word that is also equivalent to the Latin *puella*. When Ovid sings of 'Corinna' then, he is effectively singing of 'a girl'. The name he gives to his girlfriend is the name ... 'Girlfriend'.

This wordplay is exploited brilliantly in *Amores* 1.3, where Ovid seeks to assure his new *puella* – the new girlfriend who has not yet been identified – of both his fidelity and his undying devotion (1.3.15f.; 25f.):

*non mihi mille placent, non sum desultor amoris:
tu mihi, siqua fides, cura perennis eris.*
(I don't tell all the girls that they are 'the one'; I don't
leap from love to love.)

Trust me, you will be my heart's desire forever.)
*nos quoque per totum pariter cantabimur orbem,
iunctaque semper erunt nomina nostra tuis.*
(People throughout the whole world will sing about the
two of us together,
And my name will be joined to yours forever.)

But Ovid's declaration of lifelong devotion to one girl here sounds suspiciously insincere – especially since he asks us to

‘trust him’. Here he swears that her name and his will be joined together forever – *but this girl has no name*. In fact, the name ‘Corinna’ does not appear in Ovid’s *Amores* until poem 1.5 and we are offered nothing in the context of *Amores* 1.3 to help us identify this anonymous new *puella* – who may or may not be the same girl as the ‘Corinna’ of *Amores* 1.5.

Tell me more, tell me more

It seems, then, that there is no ‘one’ behind the *puella* whom Ovid calls ‘Corinna’. There is no flesh and blood Corinna whose true identity is clothed by this pseudonym. And in *Amores* 1.5, the elegy in which Ovid first introduces Corinna by name, the naked truth of this is fully revealed. Here, for the first time, we seem to see an elegiac *puella* in the flesh (*Amores* 1.5.17–24):

*ut stetit ante oculos posito velamine nostros,
in toto nusquam corpore menda fuit.
quos umeros, quales vidi tetigique lacertos!
forma papillarum quam fuit apta premi!
quam castigato planus sub pectore venter!
quantum et quale latus! quam iuvenale femur!
Singula quid referam? nil non laudabile vidi
et nudam pressi corpus ad usque meum.*

As she stood undressed before my eyes,
I saw there was no mark on her whole body.
Such shoulders, such arms I saw and I felt.
Her breasts just asking to be touched.
So smooth the belly beneath that perfect bosom.
So long and lovely her side. So youthful her thigh.
Why should I list everything? I saw nothing to complain
about,

And I pressed her naked body to mine.

Other love poets before Ovid had described the beautiful eyes, lips, and hair of their girlfriends – but here Ovid portrays his mistress in intimate detail. As the poet’s eyes move slowly down the woman’s naked body, we see her shoulders, arms, and breasts, her belly, thighs, and legs – before they fall into bed together. The poem seems incredibly daring in its erotic subject and its intimate representation of the female form. But look again. Nothing distinctive is revealed about Corinna in this poetic striptease. Her perfect body bears no mark, and Ovid’s description uses only the blandest of adjectives to represent it: her body is smooth, flawless, slender, beautiful, young – that is, idealized and unreal. There is nothing about this girl to identify her as an individual or to set her apart from any other elegiac *puella*.

Who, then, is Corinna?

She’s that girl: the one whose name will be forever joined with Ovid’s.

This article is adapted from Genevieve Liveley’s book, Ovid: Love Songs (Duckworth, 2005). Genevieve lectures at the University of Bristol, where she works on Augustan literature, critical theory, and the classical tradition, and she has written articles and essays on the classical tradition, cyborgs, and chaos theory.